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THE ART OF ROMNEY

INTRODUCTORY

SIXTEEN paintings by Romney, four of which are here reproduced in colour, come so readily to mind that they may well be called his best known works. They are:

The portrait canvas of Mr. and Mrs. William Linton.

"Lady Hamilton with a Goat," as she sweeps smilingly forward preceded by a dog, and grasps a goat by the horns; as a "Bacchante," in yellow tones, and the upright oval in tones of greenish yellow.

"Thomas John Clavering and his sister, Catherine Mary," the picture of two children. "Maria Margaret Clavering," afterwards Lady Napier, seated in landscape and clad in white with a blue sash and a blue bow at the bodice.

"Lady Craven," the charming oval of a young matron with deep auburn hair.

"Miss Benedetta Ramus," a young lady in white, resting her hands on a large book.

Her sister, "Miss Ramus," a young lady with slender neck and black hair, pink bodice, brown cloak.

"Mrs. Mark Currie," a young matron in white sitting against the balustrade of a terrace on which one of her arms rests.

"William Pitt, the Younger," a handsome man's bust portrait. The coat deep blue with brass buttons, the waistcoat a faint salmon pink, the stock white.

"Mrs. Robinson as Perdita" with the grey bonnet matched by the grey muff.

"The Parson's Daughter," a circular picture in golden brown tones.

The "Lady and Child," in the National Gallery; the "Col. Thomas Thornton" (blue military blouse with crimson collar); and the National Portrait Gallery's unfinished portrait of Romney himself with arms folded—though the forearms are barely indicated and the sleeves left empty.

THE ART OF ROMNEY

THAT Reynolds and Gainsborough were the two greatest portrait painters in England during the latter half of the eighteenth century is a proposition which no one is likely to question.

When we come to fill the third place, however, the question is not so readily settled. There are many candidates who are, or ought to be, in the running; and although the fashion of the present time may send up the prices of now one now another beyond all that is reasonable and sensible, it would be rash to say that the most popular has the best right to the position. Judged by the fickle standard of the auction room, Raeburn, at the present moment, would have precedence over Hoppner, and even Hoppner, over Romney. But who can say whether before another season is over, the merits of Lawrence or Beechey, may not come up in the market, and impress the public with ideas of beauty and genius which have hitherto escaped their notice?

George Romney, however, has better claim than any of the others to be considered next to Reynolds and Gainsborough as a portrait painter, inasmuch as he seems to have exhibited more consistently the variety of qualities necessary for excellence in that particular branch of his art. In its outward manipulation of charm and beauty, the work of Romney is all that an amateur need ask of it, and considerations of mere elegance have probably advanced his popularity in the sale room as much

as others more really important. But charm and beauty of this sort are delusive guides and, unless backed by some more enduring test of excellence, will lead us downwards only, through the scale of Hoppner, Lawrence, Harlow, and Shee, till we find ourselves in the company of the simpering beauties of the early and mid-Victorian age, with their sloping shoulders and curling ringlets. With Romney we are perfectly safe. No twinge of conscience warns us to withstand the allurements of Lady Hamilton, or the fascination of the Parson's Daughter. We may flirt as long and as desperately as we please—in an artistic sense—with Mrs. Mark Currie, without the slightest stain on our æsthetic morals. There is nothing technically meretricious about any of these beauties, and the virtue of our taste is only strengthened by the pleasurable enjoyment of their society.

Had he painted no more than the series of portraits of Lady Hamilton, to whom, as we find Allan Cunningham asserting, many have imputed the chief charm of Romney's best pictures, his enduring fame would be justified. In these days it is certainly true that her name is inseparably associated with Romney's art in the popular mind, and the latest addition to the bibliography of Romney is concerned with nothing but Lady Hamilton. Unfortunately for Romney's reputation both inside and outside his painting-room, this lady's

fame has so filled the public ear with matters which are altogether distinct from the art of painting, that it is almost impossible to appreciate her influence upon Romney's art in anything like its proper proportions. We are as it were between two fires—the glamour which she threw over the painter and the glamour which he threw over her; and our view of the matter, unless we are careful to screen our eyes, is likely to be too highly coloured for the ordinary purposes of criticism.

The broad fact seems to be that for nearly a decade the inspiration of Emma Lyon poured like sunlight into Romney's studio, and although before it came he had for several years established his reputation and done some of his best work in portraiture, its withdrawal, in 1791, was the end of all that was happy or successful in his career. "His imagination was gone," says Mr. Humphry Ward; "his health, for many years frail, became less robust than ever, and of his portraits and pictures painted after 1791, many exhibit signs of decaying powers."

That he was exceedingly fond of her need not, of course, be doubted. How could it be otherwise? But is it any more necessary to dwell upon his purely personal relations with her than on those of Sir Joshua Reynolds with Kitty Fisher or Nelly O'Brien? For Reynolds, those two "professional beauties" were sitters, of whom the painter succeeded in painting several beautiful and accomplished portraits. For Romney, Emma Lyon (afterwards Lady Hamilton) was to some extent the embodiment of the Muse whom I have ventured to postulate as his guardian angel, when engaged in the perilous

commerce of painting pretty and fashionable ladies. That she was also the veritable embodiment of all that was pleasing to the mortal eye in the shape of a woman is at least equally certain; but unlike so many of her frail sisters, she was a remarkably accomplished and intelligent woman. "She performed both in the serious and comic to admiration," writes Romney, in a letter describing an evening at Sir William Hamilton's, "both in singing and acting. Her Nina surpasses everything I ever saw, and I believe as a piece of acting nothing ever surpassed it. The whole company were in a agony of sorrow. Her acting is simple, grand, terrible, and pathetic."

In another letter, to Hayley (the poet) in June 1791, he writes, "At present, and the greatest part of the summer, I shall be engaged in painting pictures from the divine lady. I cannot give her any other epithet, for I think her superior to all womankind. I have two pictures to paint of her for the Prince of Wales. She says she must see you. . . . She asked me if you would not write my life. I told her you had begun it. Then she said she hoped you would have much to say of her in the life, as she prided herself in being my model." And again in the following month "I dedicate my time to this charming lady; there is a prospect of her leaving town with Sir William for two or three weeks. They are very much hurried at present, as everything is going on for their speedy marriage, and all the world following and talking of her, so that if she had not more good sense than vanity her brain must be turned.

"The pictures of her I have begun



are Joan of Arc, a Magdalen, and a Bacchante, for the Prince of Wales, and another I am to begin as a companion to the Bacchante. I am also to paint a picture of Constance for the Shakespeare Gallery."

The extent of Romney's obligations to her, simply as a model, may be gathered from a glance at Mr. Roberts's Catalogue Raisonné of his work. Here we find forty-five different pictures of the fair Emma, a figure which is about doubled if we count the various versions painted of one and another—as a Bacchante, for example, no less than twelve separate canvases are enumerated. Nor does this catalogue probably include a good many sketches and studies which were left unfinished. Of the various characters in which he painted her, apart from pictures which were simply portraits, the list includes those of Alope, Ariadne, a Bacchante, Cassandra, Circe, Comedy, the Comic Muse, Contemplation, Euphrosyne, a Gipsy, Iphigenia, Joan of Arc, a Magdalen, Meditation, Miranda, Nature, a Nun, a Pythian Priestess, S. Cecilia, Sensibility, a Shepherdess, Sigismunda, the Spinstress. The Sempstress, it may be mentioned, was not painted from her, but from Miss Vernon.

Such a catalogue as this, of one sitter, is unique in the annals of painting. Oddly enough it is paralleled in those of literature—if it be not thought too fanciful to quote the example of William Shakespeare. For fanciful as at first thought it may seem, it is, nevertheless, helpful to an understanding of the relations of the private life of each to his particular art.

Let us follow Mr. Randall Davies in his "Romney," in the interesting par-

allel he draws between the painter and the dramatic poet. George Romney, like Shakespeare, was born of humble parents in a remote country town, Dalton, in Lancashire. He was born on December 15th, 1734. His ancestors, yeomen of good repute, lived near Appleby, in Westmorland, but took refuge during the Civil Wars in the neighbouring county. His father was a joiner, which in those days included the trade of carpenter and cabinet-maker, and George was apprenticed to him. How and at what period the love of painting came upon him has not been clearly shown. Cumberland asserts that it was inspired by the cuts in the *Universal Magazine*. Hayley says that he consumed the time of his fellow-workmen in sketching them in various attitudes, while John Romney states that Leonardo's treatise on painting, illustrated by many fine engravings, was early in his hands. Cumberland describes him as "a child of nature who had never seen or heard of anything that could elicit his genius or urge him to emulation, and who became a painter without a prototype." At nineteen, however, he was apprenticed for four years to a painter called Count Steele, who was practising in the neighbouring town of Kendal. During this time he fell in love with a young lady of some little fortune, Mary Abbot, and on October 14th, 1756, he carried her across the border to Gretna Green and married her.

His precipitate marriage drew upon him the rebuke of his parents, but he vindicated himself with some firmness and skill. "If you consider everything deliberately," he wrote, "you will find it to be the best affair that ever hap-

pened to me ; because if I have fortune I shall make a better painter than I should otherwise have done, as it will be a spur to my application ; and my thoughts being now still, and not obstructed by youthful follies, I can practise with more diligence and success than ever."

According to Hayley, he soon perceived that his marriage was an obstacle to his studies ; that he was ruined as an artist, and might bid farewell to all hopes of fame and glory, although he was devoting himself mightily to his work. "The terror of precluding himself from those distant honours," says Hayley—to whom, by-the-by, we are under no obligation to believe more than we wish—"by appearing in the world as a young married man, agitated the ambitious artist almost to distraction, and made him resolve very soon after his marriage, as he had no means of breaking the fetters which he wildly regarded as inimical to the improvement and exertion of his genius, to hide them as much as possible from his troubled fancy."

This exordium of Hayley's is, as it were, in the nature of a "preliminary announcement" of the separation between Romney and his wife, when five years later he resolved to try his fortune in London.

"In working rapidly and patiently at different places in the north, for a few years," Hayley continues, "by painting heads as large as life at the price of two guineas or figures at whole length on a small scale for six guineas, he contrived to raise a sum amounting almost to a hundred pounds ; taking thirty for his own travelling expenses, and leaving the residue to support an

unoffending partner and two children, he set forth alone without even a letter of recommendation, to try the chances of life in the metropolis."

That was in 1762 ; and for a much longer period than Shakespeare, and with no occasional visits to his family, Romney worked in London and became more and more famous, until, as we have seen, his decline set in.

"The summer of 1799 came," writes Allan Cunningham, "but Romney could neither enjoy the face of nature, nor feel pleasure in his studio and gallery. A visible mental langour sat upon his brow—not diminishing but increasing ; he had laid aside his pencils ; his swarm of titled sitters, whose smile in other days rendered passing time so agreeable, were moved off to a Lawrence, a Shee, or a Beechey ; and thus left lonely and disconsolate among whole cartloads of paintings, which he had not the power to complete, his gloom and his weakness gathered and grew upon him. . . . In these moments his heart and his eye turned towards the north—where his son, a man affectionate and kind, resided ; and where his wife, surviving the cold neglect and long estrangement of her husband, lived yet to prove the depth of a woman's love, and show to the world that she would have been more worthy of appearing at his side, even when earls sat for their pictures, and Lady Hamilton was enabling him to fascinate princes with his Calypsos and Cassandras. Romney departed from Hampstead, and taking the northern coach arrived among his friends at Kendal in the summer of 1799. The exertion of travelling and the presence of her whom he once had warmly loved overpowered him ; he grew more lan-



guid and more weak, and finding fire-side happiness he resolved to remain where he was; he purchased a house and authorised the sale of that on Hampstead Hill." (These facts are interestingly woven into Mrs. Humphrey Ward's novel, "Fenwick's Career.")

So much for the parallel as concerned the private life of either. But what about his art? Where in Shakespeare's literary career are we to find anything comparable with the influence of Emma Lyon on Romney's painting during the crowning decade of his accomplishment? I suggest as the answer, that during a similar period, of about the same duration, namely from about 1593 to 1603, we may trace a similar influence on the poet, which is embodied in a series of masterpieces numbering over a hundred, namely, most if not all, of the first hundred and twenty-five of "Shakespeare's Sonnets." They were all written to one person, and in such terms of art as have led others besides Alexander Dyce to suppose that they were really addressed to the poet's muse rather than to any corporeal being. As in the case of Romney, the author has been maligned by the undiscerning vulgar for supposed deviations from the strict path of virtue in his relations with his friend. But for anyone who has an understanding of the spirit of art there is nothing in either case to support the allegation. Had Shakespeare and Romney looked no farther than their own hearths for artistic inspiration, the world would have been the poorer: that is all.

Oddly enough, in spite of his fame as portraitist, Romney, like Reynolds and Gainsborough, was not primarily a portrait painter. That all three of

them became painters of portraits, and will go down to posterity as such, was not because they wished to, but by the accident of circumstance. Reynolds was an humble and assiduous disciple of Michel Angelo, an earnest seeker after conquests in "the grand style." Of Gainsborough, it was said that music was his pleasure and painting his profession; while in that profession, as we know, it was landscape which chiefly occupied his mind and most delighted him. And Romney actually writes to his friend Hayley, "This cursed portrait-painting. How I am shackled with it!"

To explain the paradox one must look back a little into the history of painting in England, with a glance at that of portrait-painting in other countries besides. Taking the latter view first, it is found that the only name, which readily occurs, of an artist who painted nothing but portraits, is that of Holbein. In all the greatest schools of painting, since the days of Cimabue, portraiture was, as it were, a "by-product," and with a few exceptions like Holbein, Velasquez, or Vandyck, there is no great painter who is as well known for his portraits as for his other works. In England, until the arrival of Reynolds, there was no school of painting at all, and the only reason for any painter coming to England was the business, rather than the art, of making likenesses of its vigorous inhabitants. In England, consequently, when a school of painting was at last established, it is hardly surprising to find that the painting of portraits was the most considerable branch of it, not only in the early days of its commencement, but throughout almost the whole

of its development; and it was not until comparatively late in its history that landscape assumed considerable proportions and finally outgrew the other branch.

Had Reynolds and Romney, like Gainsborough, been landscape painters at heart, it is probable that such a combination of great talent would have resulted in a much earlier triumph for the landscapist, and that we should not have had to wait for Turner and Constable to restore the balance. For Richard Wilson, the actual founder of the English School of landscape, only failed to establish it from want of recognition, and there were many others who were fit to achieve great works in landscape if it had not been that they were compelled to comply with the popular demand for portraiture without regard to their artistic inclinations.

But there was a third branch of the art on which, though unheeded alike by the patron and the public, the minds of Romney and of many more of the most accomplished artists of the time were bent, namely, the historical; and so long as the market was closed to their achievements in this direction, it was impossible for even the greatest among them to exist without making portraiture their regular business.

Reynolds was wise, or fortunate, enough to satisfy his historical or classical aspirations by working them in, so to speak, with his portraits; and while his purely allegorical or poetical compositions have added little to his reputation, he is never so great or so attractive, as when painting portraits in terms of romance. Nor is he less deservedly popular when realising some idyllic fancy like *The Age of Innocence*, or

The Strawberry Girl, *The Infant Samuel* or *Robinette*—all of which are, in fact, portraits of a single model. Benjamin West, on the other hand, though fortunate in obtaining Royal approval, and truly royal payment, for his historical compositions, found little encouragement from the public in taking to this branch of the profession. "As any attempt in history was at that period an almost unexampled effort," wrote James Northcote, R.A., on the exhibition of West's *Pylades and Orestes* at the Exhibition of 1766, "this picture became a matter of much surprise. West's house was soon filled with visitors from all quarters to see it; and those amongst the highest rank who were not able to come to his house to satisfy their curiosity, desired to have his permission to have it sent to them; nor did they fail, every time it was returned to him, to accompany it with compliments of the highest commendation on its great merits. But the most wonderful part of the story is that notwithstanding all this bustle and commendation bestowed upon this justly admired picture, by which Mr. West's servant gained upwards of thirty pounds by showing it, yet no one mortal ever asked the price of the work, or so much as offered to give him a commission to paint any other subject. Indeed there was one gentleman who spoke of it with such praise to his father, that he immediately asked him the reason he did not purchase, as he so much admired it, when he answered, 'What could I do if I had it? You surely would not have me hang up a modern English picture in my house unless it was a portrait?'"

It was in this year that John Singleton Copley exhibited in England his



first picture, a boy with a squirrel. He, too, was obsessed with the historical idea, and carried it so far that he is better known for his grand compositions, like the *Death of Chatham*, than for the many very excellent portraits he painted. Angelica Kauffmann is remembered only by her well-intentioned but rather boneless classical compositions; and Fuseli, so far as he is remembered at all, by his weird nightmare effects in historical pieces.

Broadly speaking, history was a thankless mistress to the painters, and had it not been that Romney chose to paint portraits for the sake of accumulating enough money for the pursuit of his own artistic ambitions, his reputation as an artist would now be as totally forgotten as are those of many whose names it is almost unfair to them to mention in the present unappreciative days.

But there is fortunately another aspect of the question. A great deal is being said at the present time about the merits and demerits of a classical education for boys. On the one hand we hear that it is perfectly useless for the ordinary youth to spend the greater part of his time at school in the generally hopeless effort of acquiring some familiarity with the classical languages. On the other we are told that a boy must learn something, and that the training to the mind afforded by the study of Latin and Greek is more valuable in after life than the acquisition of any practically useful knowledge. Whichever side we may incline to in the case of the ordinary everyday boy who is to be sent out into the world to make his living in one of a dozen or more different walks of life, there can

be no question that the whole-hearted pursuit of a beloved study, whether of Greek or Latin or Chinese, by a man of purpose and character, never fails to improve him in any other study which he may wish to undertake. For the higher walks of life, such as statesmanship, or the control of large interests, or the influence of considerable bodies of opinion, it is generally admitted that the school and university training is advantageous. An archbishop is not in these days required to address Convocation in Latin, nor is a Prime Minister expected to quote Horace in debate. But either can delegate the useful duties of life to others, while they themselves are better fitted by breadth of view to deal in the largest possible manner with public questions. It is for this reason, to return to our paradox, that Mr. Randall Davies considers Romney's excellence in portraiture was due, in a large measure, to the fact that he was not willingly a portrait painter. When we see that Reynolds came back from Italy filled with the ardour inspired by Michel Angelo and Raphael for great painting; when we see Gainsborough, torn from his beloved woods and fields to the painting room, both of them establishing their reputation with practically nothing but portraiture, the paradox will seem less paradoxical, and it will be agreed that Romney, too, struggling to the last with the relentless Muse of his historical fancy, was in reality indebted to her for most of his excellence in the department of portraiture where we are ready to accord him so high a place. It is only another version of the old fable of the treasure which the father induced his boys to dig for in the vineyard. How many a

fashionable painter would do well for himself and for his art by exchanging his brush for a spade!

Anybody can paint a portrait. It is really easier than taking a photograph. One has only to look at contemporary representations of the younger members of one's friends' families in oil or pastel to realise that the ordinary person prefers a bad picture to a good photograph. There is something gratifying to the latent vanity of the sitter in the mere fact of sitting to a painter. In the old days, when there were no such things as photographs, the inducement to sit must have been still greater, and the demand for portraits enormous. Horace Walpole declares that there were no less than two thousand portrait painters in London in the middle of the eighteenth century: modern investigation has accounted for over seven hundred! To be a portrait painter, clearly, then was not to be an artist; and when we come to sift the artists from the mere likeness-mongers, we shall almost invariably find that the only great portraits were the work of men who excelled in other directions, as we have found in the cases of Reynolds and Gainsborough.

Applying this test to Romney, it is quite surprising to discover how little is said of his portraiture by his two earliest biographers, William Hayley, his life-long friend and admirer, and the Reverend John Romney, his son. Nor is there very much more, and certainly no indication of his present pre-eminence among the British portrait painters, in Allan Cunningham's lengthy Memoir of him published in 1832. It is true that his popularity, amounting to serious rivalry of Reynolds at one

period, is mentioned incidentally; as is also the devotion of his art to Lady Hamilton. But these are only considered as diversions, as it were, of his main purpose into a side channel. The dream of his life, we are to understand, was the achievement of historical compositions.

Of his classical bent John Flaxman, R. A., writes: "As Romney was gifted with peculiar powers for historical and ideal painting, so his heart and soul were engaged in the pursuit of it, whenever he could extricate himself from the importunate business of portrait painting. It was his delight by day and study by night, and for this his food and rest were often neglected." And again, by way of summing up, "A peculiar shyness of disposition kept him from all association with public bodies, and led to the pursuit of his studies in retirement and solitude which . . . allowed him more leisure for observation, reflection, and trying his skill in other arts connected with his own. And indeed few artists, since the fifteenth century, have been able to do so much in so many different branches; for besides his beautiful compositions and pictures, which have added to the knowledge and celebrity of the English school, he modelled like a sculptor, carved ornaments in wood with great delicacy, and could make an architectural design in a fine taste, as well as construct every part of the building."

The word "portraits" it will be observed occurs but once in these passages; nor does it appear elsewhere in the sketch. If then it be admitted that neither Reynolds nor Gainsborough nor Romney were primarily portrait



painters, and that their pre-eminence arises in a high degree from this cause, we shall have arrived at a standpoint from which to observe how each of the three was influenced by that cause in a different manner, and so obtain a better idea of their several excellences than we are likely to obtain from their "auction values."

In the first place, it is to be remembered that neither Reynolds nor Gainsborough was actually averse to painting portraits, whereas we have Romney's written word that he hated it. Sir Joshua, to be sure, speaks of his charming little Strawberry Girl as "One of the half-dozen original things that no man ever exceeds in his lifetime." But he was quite content to receive as many as a hundred-and-fifty sitters in the course of a single year. Gainsborough, too, could go off into raptures at the beauties of the young princes and princesses when he was painting them at Windsor, and write a flaming letter to the Royal Academy when the royal portraits were

not hung as he desired. Both found their highest expression in portraiture, as did Romney; but whereas they were not slow to realise that their respective gifts, widely different as they were, fitted them pre-eminently for this sort of work, it would seem that Romney never realised it at all; and while the other two brought all their forces, consciously, to the beautification of this particular branch of their art, Romney appears to have done no more than acquiesce coldly but, be it observed, conscientiously, in the necessity for it.

Mr. Randall Davies therefore concludes that the chief characteristics which distinguish Romney's portraits from those of his two greater contemporaries are coldness—or rather simplicity—and conscientiousness. These are conscious qualities, to which may be added a third, which is unconscious, that is to say, the influence of the classical art of the Greeks, which for the sake of brevity may be called classicism.